

Empire Airlines

Idaho's Airline



Being Local Matters

Empire's founders created the "can do" culture. Former CEO and Co-Founder Mel Spelde believed Empire was in the information delivery business.

"Mel always said Empire was an information company," Melanie Ellingson. "Yes, we fly planes and deliver cargo. Our real job is to provide information to people—our customers, our pilots, our partners."

Providing that information was a challenge for Ellingson, Director of IT at Empire. Vendors sold her equipment, installed it, but disappeared when there was a problem. Local contacts, beholden to corporate headquarters in another state, were often unable to resolve issues..

Ellingson went looking for a new vendor when it came time to upgrade Empire's phone system.

She asked colleagues and friends for advice and guidance. After hearing their stories, and based on her experience, she chose Intermox.

"Intermax is local. That's huge, gigantic to us. I can come look you in the eye if I have a problem," Ellingson said. "We're always flying so accessibility is really important to us."

Another driver in her decision? Working with Tad Thompson and other Intermox staff throughout her tenure at Empire.

"I worked with Tad (Thompson) in the past," she said. "I trust in him. I can text him in the middle of the night when we have an issue and know he'll be there. Where he goes, I will trust and follow too."

Industry: Aerospace
Intermax Customer Since: 2007

Empire Airlines, founded 40 years ago, has become known in the Inland Northwest as a "can do" company. Today, the company provides services to major cargo companies. Empire builds and repairs planes while also training flight crews and mechanics. The company offers consulting to airline startups and unmanned flight (drone) surveillance.



Founded in 2001, Intermox networks has built the largest independent fiber and wireless network in North Idaho. Our fiber optic network serves hundreds of buildings in North Idaho. Intermox brings internet, voice, data, and IT Managed Services to thousands of residential and business customers from Spokane, Washington to the Canadian border.

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Empire may be the only airline company in the world that doesn't own any airplanes. Federal Express and Hawaiian Airlines provide the planes. Empire, acting as a “feeder operator,” delivers the cargo and passengers.

“We can do what they do more nimbly and efficiently than they can do on their own,” Ellingson said. “Communication between our dispatchers, pilots, and crews in Idaho and Hawaii is crucial.”

Ellingson posts schedules via email and Dropbox. Pilots schedule flights using email, fax, and phones. They are also required to call when they land, and then again when they are available for the next flight.

“Our connection is critical,” Ellingson said. “Our dispatcher's manage all our flights, 24/7/365 from our central office in Coeur d'Alene. They handle flight plans, track weather conditions, and communicate with the pilots.”

Finding those pilots is becoming more and more difficult—and expensive. In 2009 new rules for first officers increased the number of hours of total flying time needed for certification. They must be Airline Transport Pilot certified and attain 1,500 hours total flying time.

Fewer military retirees and the added expense to qualifying them to pilot Empire's fleet of planes, has affected the company.

“We grow pilots here. Our biggest challenge is finding enough of them,” Ellingson said.

Celebrating 40 years—Looking to the Future

Despite these challenges, Empire continues to grow. The company offers passenger flights on Hawaiian airlines. They have also added more Fed Ex planes to their fleet. In 2015, Empire Unmanned marked Empire's expansion into unmanned flight.

When looking to the future, Ellingson sees Intermax as an integral part of that growth. The company will use Intermax's data center services in their disaster recovery plan.

“I like being in the cloud. Some people don't,” Ellingson said. “It allows us to replicate our network and processes onsite at Intermax.”

“I don't look at Intermax as a vendor. They are a partner, part of our business. They help us do what we do.”



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